



Rapa Nui – Easter Island
Cultural and Historical Perspectives

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Materialising Island Worlds: The Case of Prehistoric Rapanui (Easter Island)

“Architecture expressed the choices, preferences and predilection of the people who create it. In short it is an expression of the human spirit” (Morgan 1988: xiii)

Rapanui is a small, very remote island that within the twentieth century has emerged as a prehistoric warning of the potential fragility of environmentally circumscribed island communities. The island's prehistoric power structures were maintained through labour and much research has been put in to considering the role of carving colossal statues and their transport in materialising the relationships of hierarchical societies on Rapanui. Equally, and perhaps more important, is the role of multi-part monuments in providing an arena for maintaining the corporate ideologies of a contained island society and the flexibility of architectural complexity for providing components open to reconfiguration into new understandings of the world.

This article considers the case of Rapanui's *ahu*, prehistoric ceremonial platforms on which statues were set up in uniting the community as a whole into a resilient ideology that was not simply dependant on a specific resource. *Ahu* were places where the worlds of the living and the dead were replicated, maintained, overseen and transformed. There are lessons in this for isolating how islands are conceived of by their inhabitants – as articulated entities, and how the practical and ideological functioning of island communities can remain robust through the medium of a ritual architecture that is complex and adaptable enough to metaphorically constitute a microcosm of the island. Rapanui's *ahu* had a multi-scalar relationship with their surrounding landscape, variously related to their topographic locations, their sensory impact on the landscape, the divisions and boundaries they created in landscape space, and the materials of their architecture that drew upon the island's geology as a whole.

Island Bodies: Scale and Isolation

How do island geographies, landmasses that for their whole circumference can only be reached from the outside world by seafaring, affect the physical and conceptual construction of prehistoric, cultural worlds? Today, the idea of an island, as a place or condition that is synonymous with remoteness and isolation, is a powerful metaphor in everyday speech. In terms of biogeography, islands have long been considered to be places where biological evolution and species colonisation and dispersal can be studied on a scale that is easier to understand and model (Fitzhugh and Hunt 1997; Keegan and Diamond 1987). Since the 1950s, isolating cultural influences and connections has guided Pacific island archaeology, together with considerations of how isolation and limited territory can generate adaptive and radiating differences of island cultures (Terrell 2008). From a functionalist perspective, archaeologists have traditionally considered islands as distinct physical and social entities that, when extremely isolated, provide the preconditions for generating self-sufficiency and an exaggerated development of aspects of material culture and, aligned with these, potentially self-destructing trajectories (Sahlins 1955). The colossal stone statues (moai) of prehistoric Rapanui are recurrently forwarded as one of the most extreme examples of a cultural flowering and subsequent demise resulting from the combined isolation and ecological vulnerability of a small, very remote island (Diamond 2005; Flenley and Bahn 2003; Sahlins 1955).

In western epistemologies, since the Renaissance and perhaps most famously in Phineas Fletcher's (1633) tortuous poem *The Purple Island – Isle of Man*, the 'island state' has been conceived as a discrete corporal entity and likened to the complex sensory webs of the human body in which mountains and outcropping geology are the equivalent of the skeletal frame/bones of the land, rivers as veins and the land/sea boundary as a containing skin. The implications of the latter are that islands can be conceived of as articulated wholes – both physically and culturally. The actuality of 'cultural islands' neatly coinciding with the physical discreteness of geographic islands bounded by water has rightly been questioned and in a prehistoric Pacific context the role of waterways in centring some islands as hubs of connection merits emphasis. Rapanui however cannot be readily contextualised in such a way. Rapanui is a c.16 km by 23 km triangular-shaped volcanic uplift in the Pacific Ocean with an extinct volcanic cone at each apex. It is the easternmost of the Polynesian triangle of Pacific

islands, lying at a distance of 1760 km from its nearest neighbour, the Pitcairn islands, and separated by 3600 km of ocean from its nearest mainland of continental South America to the east. DNA studies suggest that Rapanui was first settled by Polynesians and it has been popularly considered to have been cut off from further external influences prior to discovery by Europeans, first by Jacob Roggeveen on Easter Day 1722. The debates over the dating of Rapanui's initial colonisation are relevant to how absolute its state of prehistoric isolation can be envisioned. The first colonisation of Rapanui has been traditionally dated as early as AD 800 or even early as AD 500 (Flenley 1998), while Terry Hunt's 'chronometric hygiene' – isolating and rejecting radiocarbon dates that have potential inaccuracies, would argue for a later date from c. AD 1200 (Hunt and Lipo 2006). Central to this discussion of contact is the prehistoric presence of the South American sweet potato on Rapanui, a staple crop of prehistoric Rapanui, on which labour for construction activities must have been reliant (Van Tilburg 1994). The South American sweet potato was historically present on Rapanui by 1722, and radiocarbon dates indicate the presence of the sweet potato in East Polynesia, on the Cook Islands, by AD 1000 (Hather and Kirch 1991: 888, 893). The sweet potato was therefore either brought to Rapanui by the first Polynesian colonists whose source community may have already been in contact with South America or it may have been acquired later by subsequent prehistoric contact with the Polynesian/South American outside world. Alongside this, it has been suggested that a second group of Polynesian settlers around AD 1500 accelerated religious change and the fluorescence of the birdman rituals (Van Tilburg 2001: 31).

The present discussion centres on the earliest period of monumental construction on Rapanui, the statue building period, focusing on AD 1200 to AD 1500 (Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2002: 254). While the above suggests that Rapanui's isolation may not have been as extreme as has been popularly presented, with Eastern Polynesia providing the initial and primary resource for the establishment and development of Rapanui's ceremonial architecture and island ideology of the statue building period, the *overall* isolation of Rapanui during the statue-building period cannot be disputed. Rapanui's combined biogeography and cultural isolation is, however, constantly iterated in a negative vein, particularly in terms of providing one of its seeds of self-construction or collapse, and I wish to move away from these generalised concepts. Here, instead, I consider what Rapanui's isolation and small spatial scale offered for

cultural consolidation, the affirmation of ancestral genealogies and the development of an integrated, multilayered understanding of the world that was not solely or simply dependent on statue construction activities, or on an environmentally constant world.

Embodied Understandings of Islands

Popular literature on Pacific islands frequently involves a castaway. Often one of the marooned individual's initial acts is to climb to the island's highest point in order to survey, understand and humanise their new island world (Weaver-Hightower 2007: 11). This castaway narrative enshrines a key element of how islands can be understood as entities through embodied experience and the sense of 'rulership' that this generates (Defoe 1719). Rapanui is of a geographic scale that its resources and even its monumental sculpture can be humanly transported around and across the whole island in a matter of days or weeks. A body-centred understanding of the whole island was potentially possible for each of its prehistoric inhabitants. Paul Rainbird (2007: i) has emphasised the archaeology of the sea – where the sea acts not as a boundary but as an extension of land activities and as an interface with the world beyond 'land'. It is thus likely that a prehistoric Rapanui island worldview would have encompassed both land and sea. By the seventeenth century, Rapanui was a place that could be visually sensed by a person to be centre of their world, surrounded by ocean with nothing else to be seen on the horizon. Pollen and historic records indicate that the majority of the island was deforested by AD 1680 (Flenley and Bahn 2003: fig. 43.3). By then, Rapanui could be encompassed in its entirety by the human eye when standing on its highest point of over 500 m on the extinct volcano of Terevaka on the northern apex of the island. Much of the coastline would also have been seen, as it can be today, from other high points. Thus, deforestation from the time of its earliest settlers would have meant increasingly that the island was visually understood as a growing whole.

Some 32 km of statue roads have been identified (Lipo and Hunt 2005: fig. 3) and indicate that they at least partially encircled the coast and that the southern road from Rano Raraku (the statue quarry) has bifurcations stretching into the centre of the island. These roads would have sustained interconnections between people engaged in the transport and setting up of statues along them and between people journeying to and from quarries and *ahu*. The island-wide

distribution of >300 statues and >80 statue topknots (*pukao*) from their respective quarries of Rano Raraku and Puna Pau, and the wide distribution of obsidian and basalt from a restricted number of obsidian sources and toki quarries indicate a shared island-wide understanding of resources and their associated material culture. Collectively, this is important for how Rapanui prehistoric communities would have perceived, rationalised and mythologised their island world.

Estimates vary widely as to the size of Rapanui's prehistoric populations – Jean Francois de Galaup de la Pérouse's suggestion of 2000 in 1786 is generally thought to be the most correct (Flenley and Bahn 2003: 169). There is a prolific island-wide presence of prehistoric ceremonial and domestic and agricultural structures (Vargas *et al.* 2006). This range of substantial construction activities – houses, *ahu* and numerous quarries – affirm the existence of a viable population size for concurrent work on multiple large-scale communal construction projects. It is this communality that affords the possibility of Rapanui's prehistoric inhabitants developing an integrated interpretation of its island world. It is therefore problematic that research on Rapanui's prehistory has been subdivided into separate units of study undertaken by independently working researchers – its statues, its roads, its *ahu*, its rock art and its gardens. This militates against revealing the evidence of island-wide integration and the complexity of its people-centred prehistoric worldview.

The Island's Land Edge – The Focus of Construction

Marshall Sahlins (1955) suggested that the extinct volcanic surfaces of Rapanui, would have been prone to nutrient deficiency once exposed through tree clearance. This would have restricted the emergence and security of socio-economic hierarchies based on communal subsistence production. More recently, Jared Diamond (2005) has deployed this factor to state the inevitability of Rapanui's environmental and associated social collapse. Sahlins (1955) suggested that the island's historically documented Polynesian ramage (conical clan) lineage systems – which in Polynesia were based on labour in subsistence production and efforts, were instead on Rapanui channelled into controlling esoteric production and that outside the construction and transportation of statues there were few communal undertakings. He noted: "Wells, reservoirs, burial terraces and sea-walls, all built on or near the coast, may also have been communally constructed.

But it is the statues, some weighing up to thirty tons and some transported many miles across the island, that represent the greatest investment of mass energy in Easter Island culture” (Sahlins 1955: 1051). In this scenario, statue moving and carving are placed centre stage in the structuring and ideology of Rapanui society. By taking an integrated approach to Rapanui’s prehistoric stone architecture, it is possible to move from the generalised characteristics of power structures to isolating in more detail how Rapanui communities understood and replicated their island world and within this the role of construction activities. Constructing monuments can be situated as a social process that creates, unifies, signifies and activates the meaning of places. This is explored here through a consideration of the construction of Rapanui’s image *ahu*, which were built and had their primary use during the statue-building period. Instead of considering *ahu* as an isolated category of monument, I will consider how through their construction, *ahu* afforded an architectural reference, metaphor and a physical link with island and sea places around and across Rapanui as a whole.

The most elaborate of the Rapanui’s *ahu* are the image *ahu* (*ahu* with statues), of which there are 164 (Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin 2008: 152). In the main, these are positioned at the very edge of the Island’s 60 km-coastline and effectively wrap the island. Thus situated, they physically negotiate between two elemental realms – land and sea. These were transformed and divided by the presence of these *ahu*. In Polynesia, facing seaward *versus* landward is an important directional concept, with the sea being the horizon from which the ancestors came (Campbell 2006: 113). The positioning of the coastal *ahu* blocked intimate views of the sea and controlled and reconstituted access to it via paved ways/canoe ramps to the sea that often run down one side of the *ahu*. This suggests a conceptual boundary of the island world that is important and potentially *tapu* (forbidden/dangerous). The back walls of the platforms of the coastal image *ahu* are substantively presented to the sea, being of massive, carefully fitted together, dry stone construction with the facing stones often being finely cut and finished (Figure 1). The statues that were set on the platforms reflect the same attention to a sea prospect, their backs often being decorated with carved symbols such as at *Ahu Nau Nau*. The statues themselves face inland with their eye sockets, which on occasions were activated with coral eyes containing scoria or obsidian pupils, gazing over the plaza that lie directly in front of the *ahu* and landscape beyond. The fronts of the *ahu* platform have ramps of neatly spaced beach boulders and the front face of the platforms have finely finished



Figure 1: *Ahu* Vinapu showing the cut and finished stone blocks on the side and back (seaward side) of the *ahu* platform wall. On the landward side a fallen *moai* can be seen.

facia stones. The *ahu* thus give architectural and directional attention to both land and seascapes. In doing so, the architecture brings together and negotiates between two landscape worlds that have distinct connotations relating to the living, and the dead and the lineage ancestors. During the statue construction period, the dead were cremated in crematoria, many of which were situated at the western end of the back, seaward terrace of the *ahu*. In Polynesian ethnographic tradition the dead travelled westward across the ocean to reside in ‘Hawaiki’, the world of the spirits, and in the direction of the mythological origin place of their voyaging ancestors.

The world of the living remained in front of the *ahu* with ceremonies taking place on the plaza and subsistence activities in the landscape beyond. Reminders to the living of the deceased lineage chiefs/ancestors were personified in the individual statues that were set up on the ceremonial platforms. Settlement and agricultural areas mostly occur c. 100–500 m inland from each coastal image *ahu* and were perceptively anchored to their ancestral *ahu* by falling under the ‘gaze’ of the statues’ eyes. Aspects of this have been isolated by Geographic Information Systems analysis (Simpson 2009) and by phenomenological (body-centred) field survey (Hamilton 2010). These ‘taskscape’ (Ingold 1993) were places from

where the statues, sometimes further elevated by their *pukao*, could be substantively experienced. The *ahu* setting was thus more than a pragmatic focus for and seaward/landward division of ritual/quotidian activities; rather it is a *spatial* representation of an island-wide ideology relating to ideas of origins and processes of life and death.

The Naturalisation of Construction

The locales of landscape-based ceremonial activities – open air activities and architecture that has a predominantly landscape setting – can be preordained by existing ideological understandings of the natural world, or be created by cultural understandings of existing in the world that identifies and uses metaphorical equivalents from the natural world (Bradley 1998; Tilley *et al.* 2000). Over the past decades, relationships between ‘nature’ and culture’ have been much discussed in archaeology and it is recognised that there can be no sharp division between the two; lines of approach that explore the synergy between the two are more productive in isolating meaning (Bender *et al.* 2007).

Ahu were of the landscape. The construction of an *ahu* involved people in significantly re-configuring island landscape space beyond the locale of the platform itself. It was a process that intimately re-contextualised human experiences of the geology and topography of place. *Ahu* were made out of and arose out of crags of basaltic flow lava. Each *ahu* is recurrently built centrally between the crags from which the majority of their *paenga* (stone wall-blocks) were quarried. Much evidence remains of the massive scale of quarrying of these crags, for example adjacent on the west side of *Ahu te Pitu Kura*. The *ahu* themselves are at right angles to the long axes of the quarried lava flows and sometimes straddle over and incorporate other lava flows at their core, for example at *Ahu Heki* (Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin 2008: fig. 5.1). Even in their denuded state, the quarried lava flows on either side of the *ahu* remain prominent enough to have acquired an architectural role in defining the lateral edges of the plaza space in front of the *ahu*. The Island’s beaches were effectively lowered and texturally changed by the removal of the thousands of *selected* flattish, elliptical well-rounded beach boulders (*poro*), measuring *c.*30 cm across for decorative placement on the front ramp of the *ahu* platform (Figure 2). In situ flow-stone was strategically and visually blended and transformed into architectural paving. The plaza area, where it abuts the front of the *ahu* platform ramp, was paved



Figure 2: *Ahu Akivi*. Note the levelled plaza and the *poro* (beach boulders) on the platform ramp. *Ahu Akivi* is one of the few major image *ahu* that are not on the coast.

with quarried slabs of columnar basalt. These are often jig-sawed in-between patches of level patches of flow lava exposed at the same level as the pavement slabs – for example, still visual at *Ahu Heki* and *Ahu Tongariki* and noted in excavation for *Ahu Vai Teka* (Mulloy and Figueroa 1978: 78). The plaza, beyond their paved areas, were transformed from the rough surface texture of Rapanui's rock-strewn landscape to smooth surfaces by the removal of innumerable fist-sized stones of ancient volcanic clinker. These were used to fill the core of the *ahu*. Centuries later yet more of this stone was collected to bury and enshrine the earlier image *ahu* and transform them into a new form of monument – pyramidal *ahu*.

Communities, Genealogies and Memory

Consideration of Rapanui prehistoric monuments has been dominated by a focus on how the statues were transported. The distribution of the completed statues that were taken away from the statue quarry of Rano Raraku (the majority remained at the quarry) meant carving and hauling an estimated 14000 tons of stone over distances of up to 18km (Lipo and Hunt 2005: 158). The social

and symbolic importance of this construction activity cannot be denied, but it may not have been the most inclusive of activities in replicating island ideology. While debates abound as to how the statues were moved, Carl Lipo and Terry Hunt (2005) have noted that several studies suggest that a limited number of individuals could have moved the statues rather than large groups of organised labour (Lee 1998, 1999; Love 2000; Van Tilburg 1996). Setting up a statue in the range of 2–10 m high and weighing up to 80 tons on top of an *ahu* platform perhaps would have been the most labour intensive and community-involved part of a statue's transport from quarry to *ahu*. For example, Thor Heyerdahl, during his 1955 expedition to the Island, worked with 11 local men using what they considered to be the traditional method of stone-piled ramps, levers and lashing and took 18 days to raise and reconstitute the original 4.5 m height and 3 m wide statue on *Ahu Ature Huki* (Skjölsvold 1961: 371–372).

Overall, it can be suggested that the construction of *ahu* and their associated settings was collectively more labour intensive and inclusive of whole communities than statue construction and transport. The largest of the image *ahu* are distributed evenly around the island and it is suggested that each chiefdom district had a primary ceremonial centre (Stevenson 2002). The making and maintaining of any *ahu* and in particular the largest of the image *ahu* would have been a multi-tasked, large-scale enterprise. Refocusing on the *ahu* as a magnet for Rapanui prehistoric labour-intensive activities allows us to consider new issues of the development of Rapanui's prehistoric island identity and the role of architectural materiality in the construction of collective memory. The *ahu* were where the dead were cremated (and later inhumed) and the stone statues set on the platforms represented the ancestors/lineage chiefs. Genealogically related communities would have been conjoined and reinforced through their long-term association with the on-going building tasks and activities associated with *ahu*. Ralph Linton in his *Ethnology of Polynesia and Micronesia* described how, on the South Pacific Society Islands, claimants of ancestral lands were examined at their ancestral *marae* (ceremonial platforms), highlighting the central role of such forms of architecture in maintaining ideologies of memory and ancestry (Linton 1926: 155).

Ahu were key monuments in creating Rapanui's prehistoric use and understanding of island-wide space, not just because of their individual impact on swathes of the landscape but importantly through their repeated formulae of construction and architectural components. As Matthew Campbell has noted

for the ceremonial platforms (*marae*) of Raratonga in the southern Cook Islands “[c]learly, sets of rules regarding location, layout, orientation, construction and material would have applied” (2006: 106). Drawing on Michael Rowland’s (1993) concept of inscribed memory in the transmission of culture, it can be suggested that *ahu* construction relied on repetition of design and constant bringing together of materials from different parts of the Island, thereby constituting a material representation of the Island itself. This is at its most discernible in Rapanui’s image *ahu*, but multiple elements of the schema recur in the many hundreds of *ahu* that recur across the island landscape. At a microscale, the communal scale of labour, precision, and care of achieving the ‘correct’ formula for these acts of construction can be gleaned from the published restoration and reconstruction work and associated excavation work on Rapanui *ahu*. (These works came to the fore in the 1960s at *Ahu Akivi* (an impressive image *ahu* some 2.5 km inland; Figure 2) and *Ahu Vai Teka* (Mulloy and Figueroa 1978) and the restoration of the ceremonial complex at Tahai – *Ahu Tahai* and *Ahu Ko te Riku* (1968–1970), and *Ahu Vai Uri* (1970), (Mulloy 1970). By the end of the twentieth century some ten *ahu* had undergone such work including Rapanui Sergio Rapu’s excavation and restoration at *Ahu Nau Nau* at Anakena (1978–80) and more recently at *Ahu Riata* (1998), (Martinsson-Wallin 2004: 161).

The scale of construction and labour involved in an *ahu*’s materialisation was great. The largest of the masonry platforms of the *ahu* are c. 200 m long and a 10 m high (Mulloy 1970: ii). At *Ahu Vai Uri*, the lower courses of the platform walls comprised vertically placed slabs, each weighing three to four metric tons, the underlying bedrock having been modified to securely seat the stones (Mulloy 1970: 2, 20). At *Ahu Akivi* the platform wings were constructed on artificially prepared, built-up surfaces (Mulloy and Figueroa 1978: 17). The closely grained basalt pedestals on which the statues were set each average some 2000 kg in weight (Mulloy 1970: 68). The plaza areas in front of the platforms were landscape features in their own right, for example taking up areas of 65 m × 70 m at *Ahu Vai Uri* and 90 m × 25 m at *Ahu Akivi* (Mulloy and Figueroa 1978: 50). Many of the plaza were created by artificially modifying the original terrain in order to create a level surface. The “hard clayey soil” for example was levelled at *Ahu Nau Nau* (Martinsson-Wallin 1994: 43). At *Ahu Akivi*’s a level plaza was achieved by removing the pre-occupation surface in the plaza’s northern area while increasing the southern area surface elevation with artificial fill (Mulloy and Figueroa 1978: 21; Figure 2). There is also evidence that the paved areas

immediately in front of the ramp of the *ahu* platform were laid on artificial fill, for example at *Ahu Vai Uri* (Mulloy 1970: 4). Additionally, many of the coastal *ahu* are associated with peripheral paved ramps leading to the sea (Hamilton 2010) and these too were significant works of construction. The elaborate ramp and wharf at Tahai, for instance, involved the deliberate chipping of the living rock, some of which was at a depth of one metre below the low tide level, in order to properly seat the slabs – thus achieving the striking visual effect that the ramp rises directly from the sea (Mulloy 1970, plate 13). The use of smaller stones and boulders was equally precise and laborious. Mulloy and Figueroa (1978: 40) calculated that, for the decorative surfacing of the front ramp of *Ahu Akivi*, a total of 2149 *poro* (selected beach boulders) had been gathered from the seashore (Figure 2), which in this case was at the nearest some 2.5 km away. Certainly at the time of Mulloy and Figueroa's investigation, the right sort of boulders were not prolific and would have required a concerted effort to locate in quantity; likewise, with the distinctive small rounded beach pebbles (*kikiri*) which were used to cover some of the crematoria fills and in other cases filled the spaces between the *poro* on the ramps – today these are only located in quantity at a very few places around the Island's shores.

The *ahu* were frequently re-built and added to over time. A minimum of four major building phases, over a maximum of 600 years have, for example, been identified at *Ahu Nau Nau* (Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin 2008: 153) and maintenance and smaller adjustments were likely continuous. The construction activities would have provided the loci where the power structures of the social organisation of labour would have been constantly played out. A common understanding of the world would have been inscribed in the collective memory of the constructing communities through the repeated enactment of precepts of construction. These acts of building would have allowed new chiefs to distinguish themselves from their predecessors by making change visible through adding new construction details to and/or rebuilding individual *ahu* (Martinsson-Wallin 1994: 134). It is visually evident in the numerous examples of older statues, parts of statues and sometimes petroglyph boulders incorporated into the outer back walling of *ahu*, for example at *Ahu Nau Nau* (Figure 3) and *Ahu Maitaki te Moa* and it has been regularly revealed in excavation of the body of *ahu* platforms (Stevenson and Haoa Cardinali 2008: fig. 1.7; Martinsson-Wallin 1994: 46). Excavations, for example, revealed earlier statues and building blocks with petroglyphs buried within the foundations, and the rebuilt bodies



Figure 3: Head of broken statue incorporated into the back, seaward wall of *Ahu* Nau Nau.

of *Ahu* Akivi and *Ahu* Tongariki. These may have been brought from other *ahu* or reused from preceding *ahu* to invest the new structures with pre-existing power (*mana*) (Mulloy and Figueroa 1978: 27). This on-going process can be understood as a repeated reconstitution of the past in the ‘present’ (Bloch 1977). Similar evidence includes the rebuilding and incorporation of preceding *ahu* platforms (sometimes on a differing orientation) within new *ahu*, for example at *Ahu* Akahanga and *Ahu* Ura Uranga Te Mahina (Vargas *et al.* figs 4.63, 6.8 and 6.9). Most notably, the structural remains of *ahu* below *Ahu* Tongariki’s plaza’s surface level showed a complex sequence of architectural expansions and recycling of components of several platforms and pavements and the use of earlier types of statues as foundations, as wall building blocks, and/or fill material (Cristino and Vargas 2002).

***Ahu* as Island metaphor**

The *ahu* more than any other structures monumentally bound together the physical substances of the Island – its rocks and stones of distinct sources and geologies. Martinsson-Wallin (2004) has commented on the sacred power of stone in Polynesia and in particular the ceremonial associations of worked

stone. The status attached to worked stone is clear in the image *ahu*. Here, worked stone is associated with the statues, the statue hats, the facia on the front of the *ahu* platform and on some *ahu* platforms the seaward wall blocks are cut and finished. Several of the *ahu* platform walls incorporated the worked foundation stones of dismantled boat-shaped houses (*hare paenga*) and I have already noted the stones with petroglyphs that occur both on the walling faces and in the body of the platform walling. The *ahu*'s ceremonial platform, on which the statues were set up, was the most sacred part of the *ahu* complex and it is notable that architectural worked stone is restricted to this part of the *ahu* complex. Indeed, worked stone, with the exception of the boat-shaped houses – the most substantial of which are interpreted as elite structures associated with priests – is generally rare in the Island's prehistoric architecture. It is notable that image *ahu* alone incorporate all the elements of worked stone associated with the Island's architecture.

In addition to their symbiotic relationship with repetitive elements in their local landscape, *ahu* are architectural foci for stone from all over the island – this is more so than any other prehistoric structure on the Island (Hamilton *et al.* 2011). Red scoria from Puna Pau is used on the *ahu* platform facia, for the statues hats, and is ground down to be placed in the cremations and under plaza pavements. The earliest statues incorporated in the body of *ahu* are made of a range of local basalts and scoria, local stone from adjacent lava flow crags constitute the stone blocks and facings for much of the *ahu* walling and beach boulders adorn the ramps. The tuff statues of the main period of *ahu* construction, as noted, came from the ancient volcano quarry at Rano Raraku and are distributed to *ahu* all round the island. The statue eyes (periodically inserted to 'activate' some of the statues) comprised irises of sea coral and pupils of red scoria or obsidian. In addition, lashing, wood levers and stone tools for chipping, pulverising and smoothing stone, and obsidian flakes for cutting lashings were brought to *ahu* for the construction process. Many of these additional raw materials for construction activities came from sources on the island that were not immediately local and were therefore specifically sources of island-wide importance such as the Rua Tokitoki quarry inland of La Perouse Bay in Rapanui's north coast, or the major source of obsidian at Maunga Orito. As a result of this, *ahu* at their most elaborate were embodiments of the Island's resources and of its stones of importance.

Reworking Island Worlds

There is evidence that the demise of the image *ahu* tradition was not marked by their simple abandonment or by violent destruction and violation, as has been frequently suggested. William Mulloy commented “[t]hese modifications appear to have been systematically planned and not a sequence of casual activity” and noted the tremendous amount of effort involved (1970: 5–6). More recently, Nicolas Cauwe has suggested that they were conscientiously dismantled (Cauwe 2011), entombed by piles of volcanic clinker and converted into what are known as pyramidal *ahu* – as part of a restructuring of Rapanui’s socio-political system which radically reduced the clan structures, at the climax of deforestation. While the single or collective causes of this change, which appears to have been complete by the eighteenth century, are debated, it is interesting that the image *ahu* and specific component parts were central to the metaphoric representation of these changes. This involved the transformation of the location, state and role of the statues, rather than their destruction. At *Ahu Motu Toremo Hiva* an inclined plane was constructed on top of the ceremonial ramp of the most recent *ahu* to aid evacuation of statues to a place unknown (Cauwe 2011: 57). It is suggested that today’s remaining configurations of groups of now recumbent statues, for example at *Ahu Hanga Te’e* (Cauwe 2011: 66) (Figure 4), indicate that they were carefully lain down one by one – following organised procedures, rather than being merely toppled. Given that the Rano Raraku tuff offers little resistance to impact, it is considered to be indicative of careful dismantlement that many statues remain intact and that although many others are broken, the fractures are clean and contiguous. Where the lowered statues remain on the *ahu* they are strategically placed with their stomachs serving as ceilings of burial vaults, thus continuing in another format the role of *ahu* as repositories for the dead.

Poro from the *ahu* ramps were also taken away for use in other *ahu* and for the pavements of the boat-shaped houses. Excavations at *Ahu Motu Toremo Hiva* and *Ahu te Niu* revealed this process in the holes left by the imprints of the removed *poro*. Recent excavations have revealed several *ahu* where kilos of red scoria dust were layered in front of the statue platforms *after* the removal of the statues (Cauwe 2011: 61). Symbolic associations are also continued in the frequent small coralliferous pebbles that were placed on *ahu* converted into semi-pyramidal shapes thus retaining the representational importance of coral,



Figure 4: *Ahu* Hanga Te'e. A case can be made that the statues were carefully lowered and that the *ahu* was decommissioned rather than destroyed by warfare.

which was traditionally used for the statue eyes and taken inland for placement in rock gardens and plant enclosure walls, for reasons of its water associations (Cauwe 2011; Hamilton *et al* 2011). The use of meaning-charged stone in transforming and entombing *ahu*, and the continued potency of the re-used stones previously associated with *ahu*, emphasises the extent to which *ahu* were architectural microcosms and metaphors in stone of the ideology associated with the Island as a physical entity.

Conclusion

Rapanui's monuments of stone reverberate Jennifer Kahn and Patrick Kirch's observations for the Society Islands that "[t]his process of ritual landscape creation... augmented the role that ideology played in developing and maintaining political power" (Kahn and Kirch 2011: 102). Additionally, this paper suggests that the Rapanui image *ahu* served an essential role of representing the island as a body-like entity. The design of *ahu* begun with the conceptualisation of the Island as a whole and as such *ahu* encompassed and metaphorically reconstituted the totality of interactions and beliefs that Rapanui as a prehistoric island

world constituted. These beliefs were materialised through the construction process and the bringing together of stones with *mana*. While the materials may change in different island contexts, the Rapanui example pre-eminently highlights the role of the ritual architectural, and its materials and components, conjoined with the construction process in creating, accreting and memorialising prehistoric island worlds.

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